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The Conference Board

A Topical Report from the Consumer Research Center October 1990

Special Consumer Survey Report

The Issues of Public Concern

The Cost of Medical Care, Drug Abuse, and Crime are regarded, by the American public, as the nation's most pressing economic and social problems. Also high on the list of concerns are Pollution, AIDS, and the Federal Budget Deficit, in that order. Smoking, Race Relations, and the Threat of Nuclear War are considered to be the least serious. These are the major findings of a Conference Board survey in which respondents were asked to assess the degree of seriousness with which they regard a list of twenty-two economic and social issues. Participants were given five response options, ranging from "Most Serious" to "Least Serious." The survey, conducted for the Conference Board by National Family Opinion, Inc., covered a representative nationwide sample of 5,000 households.

A similar survey, covering almost all of the same issues, was conducted in the Summer of 1988. Since then, there have been some fairly large changes in the public's assessment of the nation's problems. Drug Abuse and the Cost of Medical Care were also near the top of the list in the earlier study. However, in both instances, the degree of public concern is now greater. In the previous probe, about 83% of all respondents considered the Cost of Medical Care to be a serious problem, but in the most recent study 88% expressed that view. The increase in concern over Drug Abuse was almost as large.

Crime is also causing increasing anxiety. This problem has moved up from fifth place to third place on the list. In the earlier study, some 75% of all respondents regarded Crime to be a serious problem, while now 81% express that view. Pollution has moved up sharply on the list of public worries. About 80% of respondents now regard Pollution as "serious," up from only 65% two years ago. However, concern over AIDS has declined from 83% of those surveyed in 1988, to 77% now. The Federal Budget Deficit is regarded with the same degree of seriousness as in the earlier study. Both then and now, some 78% of the public considered this to be a major problem.

Age often makes a difference in how an individual assesses an issue. Persons over 55 generally worry a good deal more than younger people about the Savings & Loan Crisis, as well as the Federal Budget and Foreign Trade Deficits. Also, older people are particularly concerned about Crime and the Cost of Medical Care. These are clearly matters of considerable concern to the elderly. The relatively young, on the other hand, express substantially above-average concern about the availability of Child Care Facilities, Cost of Housing and College Education—again, issues that are important to the age group. On most issues, the young and the middle-aged worry less than those no longer young.

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There are also differences by income level. Broadly, those in the lower brackets tend to worry more than the affluent, particularly about Unemployment, the Homeless, Housing Costs, Alcoholism, Child Care, and Race Relations—matters which evidently affect their everyday life. The well-heeled express below-average concern over almost all issues included in the study, except for the Federal Budget Deficit and Education. Affluence evidently decreases the sense of vulnerability.

There are also differences in response patterns by regions of the country. The West coast appears to be least disturbed about most issues, the East coast most disturbed. The difference in the age profile between East and West may have something to do with this. People in New England and the Middle Atlantic states are more concerned than the rest of the nation about Housing Costs, Race Relations, and the Savings & Loan Crisis. Poverty, the Homeless, and AIDS, are also considered to be more serious in the Middle Atlantic states than in other areas. In the Pacific region, only Housing and Pollution are regarded with more anxiety than in other areas.

Fabian Linden

THE DEGREES OF PUBLIC CONCERN

Here are a number of economic and social issues which are causing many people conern. How would you rate the seriousness of each of these issues as ompared to the others?

	Most Serious	Survey Conducted 1990			Least Serious	Serious Concern* 1990	Serious Concern* 1988
Cost of Medical Care	63.6%	24.8%	9.1%	1.9%	0.6%	88.4%	82.7%
Drug Abuse	65.7	22.5	8.5	2.1	1.1	88.2	84.7
Crime	47.3	33.9	15.7	2.4	0.6	81.2	75.2
Pollution	49.1	30.4	15.6	3.6	1.2	79.5	65.3
Federal Budget Deficit	46.8	31.4	17.3	3.1	1.3	78.2	77.8
AIDS	55.7	21.8	13.5	5.0	4.1	77.5	82.7
Elementary Education	43.5	30.7	19.8	4.2	1.9	74.2	68.9
The Homeless	46.8	25.3	18.1	6.2	3.5	72.1	67.3
Poverty	44.6	26.2	20.0	6.1	3.1	70.8	67.0
Alcoholism	40.3	30.1	20.6	6.2	2.9	70.4	66.4
Cost of Housing	30.7	35.4	25.2	6.5	2.1	66.1	59.5
Unemployment	31.8	34.0	23.7	8.9	1.7	65.8	63.8
Foreign Trade Deficit	26.4	38.1	27.1	6.3	2.2	64.5	67.7
S & L Crisis	31.9	31.5	26.3	7.9	2.3	63.4	NA
Loss of Jobs in Mfg.	28.8	34.5	25.9	8.5	2.2	63.3	64.7
Plight of Farmers	28.2	34.6	23.7	8.8	4.8	62.8	76.1
White Collar Crime	24.7	33.1	28.6	10.1	3.6	57.8	52.0
Higher Education	23.5	31.8	30.8	9.6	4.3	55.3	52.5
Child Care Facilities	23.5	29.0	30.4	10.6	6.5	52.5	NA
Smoking	25.9	25.3	25.2	13.1	10.6	51.2	45.4
Race Relations	19.1	24.7	34.0	13.0	9.1	43.8	40.6
Threat of Nuclear War	10.9	15.1	27.1	24.0	22.9	26.0	35.6

*This measure is the proportion of respondents indicating either Most Serious (first column) or Serious (second column).

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